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SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: "Land is Life": Indians vs. Agro-Industry in Mato Grosso do Sul

REF: A. Brasilia 1; B. Brasilia 349

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED--PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

¶1. (U) Summary: Indigenous groups and agriculturalists disagree vigorously over land rights in Mato Grosso do Sul state, and observers on both sides see no easy solution to a problem with economic and cultural dimensions. On one side, the GOB, NGOs and indigenous groups insist that state governments must return native lands to the Indians, who then intend to return to their traditional way of life. On the other, state and local political leaders scoff at the legitimacy of Indian demands, saying this would break the back of the region's prosperity. In the background, the Indians are grappling to define themselves. Indian participation in democratic politics is rising, but there were also indications of possible increased polarization at the grassroots level. End Summary.

¶2. (U) During a March 10-13 visit to Mato Grosso do Sul State, Consul General and Poloff met with a variety of Federal and State government, private sector, and indigenous representatives. Poloff also visited an Indian reservation on the outskirts of the regional city of Dourados (pop. 200,000). Among those interviewed were: State Governor Andre Puccinelli, State Chief Justice Elpidio Helvecio Chaves, Federal Prosecutor and indigenous rights advocate Marco Antonio Delfino, Federal Anthropologist (Consultant to Prosecutor) Marcos Homero Ferreiro Lima, President of the local federation of industries (FIEMS) Sergio Marcolino Longen, Catholic Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI) attorney Rogerio Battaglia, and Guarani indigenous leaders Otoniel Ricardo, Teodora de Souza, Edil Benites, and Norvaldo Mendes.

Agriculturalists vs. Indians

¶3. (U) Mato Grosso do Sul's thriving agriculture, powered by sugarcane, cattle, wood, and soy production is moving the state forward economically. The agricultural boom, however, has cost indigenous groups, mostly Guarani and Terena Indians, their ancestral lands. During the 1950s, Indians were pushed off their lands in a variety of ways, ranging from purchases for artificially low prices to outright expulsion. Consequently, only 0.5 percent of the state's territory remains in the hands of indigenous groups, according to State Prosecutor Marco Antonio Delfino. This contrasts with neighboring Mato Grosso State where 27 percent of the land remains in indigenous hands.

Farmers Have Land, But Not Titles

¶4. (U) Mato Grosso do Sul's agribusinesses possess the contested lands, in many cases for decades, but relatively few have legal title to those holdings. According to University of Sao Paulo

geographer Professor Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira, 30 to 40 percent of the big agriculturalists in states like Mato Grosso do Sul have no title to their holdings. Encouraged by the recent Raposa/Serra do Sol decision (Refs A and B), the Indians are now awaiting a Federal Government survey ("demarcation") that promises to give back their ancestral territories.

The Establishment: Just Say No!

15. (SBU) State and local leaders from the top down were adamant in their rejection of Indian land demands. They also had strong criticisms of Indian attitudes and culture. Among the views sampled:

-- Governor Puccinelli scoffed at the idea that land, in an agricultural state like Mato Grosso do Sul, could be taken away from productive farmers who had cultivated these lands "for decades" and returned to Indian groups.

-- State Chief Justice Chaves complained that Indian advocacy groups, including the Catholic Church NGO CIMI, regularly slander local law enforcement representatives, charging them with torture and racism, when local officials are simply trying to enforce the law.

--Chaves warned that trends toward separatism in the Indian community - concentrating Indians on expanded reservations - would only magnify their problems. Dourados has a neighboring reservation, which Chaves predicted would become "Brazil's first indigenous favela" if tendencies to isolate and give separate treatment to indigenous peoples continue.

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--Chaves and other local officials clearly believed the Indian land claims and stated intentions to return to traditional life were baseless. City and state officials asked how the local Indians claim to be indigenous, when these same Indians "use cars, sneakers, drugs?" They complained about state subsidies to the Indians, stating that the latter "would have to learn to work like everyone else."

The Indians and Their Allies

16. (U) Indigenous advocates, including GOB officials, and indigenous representatives held diametrically opposed views:

--Indigenous leaders were unrelenting in their land demands and would accept no substitute for their ancestral territories, where their forefathers are buried and where they can live in a more traditional, communal fashion. "The land is life," they said.

--GOB and CIMI representatives charged that local officials had used scare tactics, whipping up panic-inducing public campaigns that exaggerate how much land would be returned to the Indians. They also stated the indigenous make up a disproportional amount of the area's prison population.

On the Reservation

17. (U) A visit to the Guarani/Terena Indian reservation just outside Dourados with Federal Anthropologist and Indian advocate Homero Ferreira Lima confirmed elements from the accounts given by those on both sides of the conflict.

The State Has Provided Help...

18. (U) On the one hand, Federal and State officials, as well as Protestant missionaries, have provided the reservation with tangible benefits, including a hospital, two schools (one functioning, one under construction), and brick houses. Indians also receive a monthly stipend from the GOB.

...But It Often Doesn't Match Indians' Needs

19. (U) On the other hand, much of what the government gives does

not match the Indians' needs, according to Ferreira Lima. Brick houses, for example, do not support the Indian's nomadic lifestyle, which is how they have historically avoided intra-group conflict. Among those who do not abandon their government-constructed houses, reservation life has escalated interpersonal tensions, often resulting in assaults and murders.

¶10. (SBU) Lima Ferreira also noted that historically the Guarani had practiced infanticide. One possible legacy of this is a significant number of abandoned, undernourished children cared for in a special division of the reservation hospital, visited by Poloff. As Lima Ferreira acknowledged, child abandonment may still be culturally acceptable among some of the Indians, but constitutes a crime and a scandal in the eyes of the Brazilian State and society.

Indian Political Participation/Possible Polarization

¶11. (U) Indigenous groups are divided among the best course of action to achieve their political goals. Ferreira Lima noted that, in the face of public campaigns against Indian land claims, the Indians were making inroads into local politics, electing state-level congressional representatives and mayors in predominantly indigenous areas. At the same time, teachers at the reservation school advocated direct action. During Poloff's visit, faculty were showing students a film about how Yanomami Indians had kidnapped and held hostage a bulldozer operator who threatened to cross into their lands. They released him when local law enforcement arrived. The local teachers asserted that this was a good "consciousness-raising" example for students.

Comment: No End in Sight

¶12. (SBU) It was difficult to see a potential middle ground in the Indian-agribusiness conflict over land in Dourados. Though the local Indians seem less radical than, for example, the non-ethnic Landless People's Movement (MST), they appear no less dedicated to their eventual goal of regaining ancestral lands. Landowner

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opposition is similarly entrenched. Curiously, the Indians have never linked up with the MST, because they see their ethnically-based cause as distinct from that of those who are simply landless. While agribusiness often lack clear land title, they frequently can show long-term land utilization, and their activity is crucial to the state's growing economic prosperity. The outcome of ongoing legal cases is unclear, but, in the meantime, indigenous land issues in Mato Grosso do Sul and other areas will continue to present challenges to Brazilian democracy. End Comment.

¶13. (U) This cable was coordinated/cleared by Embassy Brasilia.

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